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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002086

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: ERDOGAN SHIFTS INTO NATIONALIST GEAR

REF: A. ANKARA 1935

[1](#)B. ANKARA 1943

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel G. O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Islamist columnist Fehmi Koru's November 6 comment that Prime Minister Erdogan came to power in 2002 as an "Obama-like personality but came to resemble President Bush" drew an aggressive reaction from Erdogan and generated a groundswell of commentary. Many who had once supported PM Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) came forth with sharp criticism that shared a common theme: the original pro-reform PM had morphed into a status-quo nationalist politician. Some even alleged that Erdogan had struck an implicit deal with the Turkish military to avoid another attempt by the state establishment to ban AKP. Other contacts told us that Erdogan's shift is a natural reflex from a skillful and pragmatic politician who is trying to navigate turbulent political waters in the lead up to March 2009 local elections. They believe that a solid AKP victory in the elections will provide Erdogan the political cover to re-start stalled reforms. Although political pressure may have created a more stubborn prime minister whose party has fallen in recent polls, counting out Erdogan is premature. He remains by far the most popular politician in Turkey, and none of his opponents appears to have gained from Erdogan's relative slump. Still, the absence of checks on Erdogan's power comes with a heavy cost. End summary.

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From Obama to Bush  
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[1](#)2. (U) Fehmi Koru, a columnist for Islamist-leaning "Yeni Safak" who is seen as generally supportive of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), surprised Turkey's political establishment when he stated during a November 6 NTV interview that PM Erdogan entered politics as a progressive reformer like Barack Obama, and then had steadily moved toward a status quo stance that recalled, in his view, President Bush. Later, in his November 12 column, Koru explained that Erdogan had come to power as a pluralistic leader who championed European Union reforms and promised a progressive approach to solve the Kurdish issue but over time shifted to a pro-state, pro-military stance. Erdogan's new approach was evident to Koru when the PM responded to a wave of protests in response to his November visit to the southeastern city of Hakkari by inviting those who were not happy to "go wherever they please" (ref A). In Koru's view, Erdogan's comment was a sharp deviation from Erdogan's daring acknowledgment in a 2005 Diyarbakir speech that the Turkish state had made fundamental mistakes in its approach to the

Kurdish issue.

¶3. (U) Erdogan responded promptly and aggressively to Koru's comment, telling an audience at AKP's November 9 Ankara sub-provincial convention, "There are those who claim that we came to power like Obama but became like Bush. Shame on you. We are neither Bush nor Obama. We are ourselves." Erdogan remarked that those who try to draw similarities between AKP and others "should think well" about their comments. In a November 24 meeting, AKP Deputy Chairman for Electoral Affairs Necati Cetinkaya told us that he was insulted by Koru's charge. Cetinkaya, an AKP founder and close associate of Erdogan, insisted that the PM "is the same person today that he was when he was Istanbul mayor -- a steady leader who supports pluralistic democracy, dialogue, and tolerance." Cetinkaya said the voters had shown their appreciation of Erdogan's democratic views in successive elections and would do so again in March 2009 local elections.

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Reformers Sour on PM  
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¶4. (SBU) A groundswell of criticism from liberal and Islamist columnists traditionally supportive of AKP followed Koru's remarks. Mehmet Altan, chief columnist at "Star" daily, wrote that following the AKP closure case Erdogan had abandoned his conciliatory attitude toward Turkey's Kurds in favor of untranationalist rhetoric intended to placate the Turkish military and state establishment. The shift had caused the reform-minded Dengir Mir Firat to resign his party

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Vice Chairmanship out of frustration (ref B). Erdogan underscored his new attitude by replacing Firat with Abdulkadir Aksu, a former ANAP Interior Minister who had suppressed Kurdish political and cultural rights. Ahmet Altan, Editor-in-chief of liberal daily "Taraf," wrote that Erdogan had cast aside liberal and reformist policies on EU reforms, a new civilian-drafted constitution, and the renewal of the legal system, and had chosen "to be a spokesman for the state rather than for the public."

¶5. (C) Baskin Oran, a retired Ankara University political science professor, told us that PM Erdogan's progressive human rights policies and "unbelievable pace of EU reforms" in 2002-2004 had set high expectations for those like him who are committed to transforming Turkey into a truly modern democracy. Oran said that Erdogan's apparent willingness to challenge the traditional establishment view of entrenched problems like the Kurdish issue was reason for Oran to maintain optimism despite being prosecuted at the time for publishing a government-commissioned report on the state of minorities in Turkey. However, Erdogan had steadily lost his reformist spirit, adopted the "securitization policies" of the Turkish General Staff (TGS), and assumed the "chauvinistic attitude" of the old establishment that he had been fighting, Oran said. This "about face" had caused Oran to turn from supporter to outspoken critic.

¶6. (C) The European Commission's Ankara Political Chief Serap Ocak told us that she had been waiting for Erdogan's "reform-minded, non-ideological" side to re-appear following the July 2007 AKP closure case but instead saw only "an increasingly autocratic and out of touch" prime minister who "lashes out at critics with increasingly irascible outbursts." Ocak thought that Erdogan had shown a "fundamental intolerance" of a free press when he ordered AKP members to boycott the Dogan Media Group's newspapers after Dogan-owned "Hurriyet" broke the Deniz Feneri (Lighthouse) scandal story and had rescinded the press accreditation of several journalists on the prime ministerial beat. EC Human Rights Officer Sema Kilicer told us that Erdogan had failed to acknowledge or address the considerable backsliding on police torture and extra-judicial killings that have risen during the past year.

¶7. (C) Several reformists entered the fray by arguing that Erdogan had not changed because he had never been truly

reformist. "Hurriyet's" Ahmet Hakan wrote that AKP had crafted a reformist image to satisfy the EU but in reality was always in-line with the military establishment on the Kurdish issue. "AKP initiated one or two promising reforms that were exaggerated by intellectuals," according to Hakan. Human Rights Association President Ozturk Turkdogan told us Erdogan develops his policies only with a mind toward retaining power. Erdogan had come to power in 2002 by cleverly publicizing an EU reform initiative to convince voters that he sincerely desired changed. Turkdogan said Erdogan had similarly crafted Alevi and Kurdish outreach programs to help him win re-election in 2007.

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Boxed In By Reality  
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18. (C) Erdogan's recent changes are a natural reaction from a skillful, pragmatic politician who understands that staying on top of the turbulent Turkish political system requires controversial decisions, according to Bilkent Law School Professor Ergun Ozbudun, the main drafter of AKP's new civilian constitution. Ozbudun told us that Erdogan had little choice in shifting his political stance toward more status-quo policies. By failing to close AKP by just one vote, the Constitutional Court and the state establishment had sent AKP a stern message. Erdogan understood that AKP escaped closure by a "hair's breadth," and therefore shelved AKP's project to write a new civilian constitution and made an "implicit bargain" with the military establishment. Reminding us that Erdogan had spent 120 days in jail in 1999 for "inciting animosity and hatred" by quoting a poem that said, "minarets are our bayonets, domes of the mosques our helmets, and mosques our barracks, believers our soldiers," Ozbudun said Erdogan will "remain cautious" for the foreseeable future.

19. (C) AKP Diyarbakir MP Abdurrahman Kurt told us Erdogan sees the March 2009 local elections as a referendum on AKP, and is therefore adopting nationalistic stances on a number

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of issues in order to solidify AKP's vote among an overwhelmingly conservative, nationalistic electorate that is sensitive to PKK terrorist attacks. Following the narrow escape in the closure case and in the face of a highly critical opposition, Erdogan had become hesitant to pursue a reformist agenda. A solid performance at the polls in March 2009 would provide Erdogan the political cover needed to move forward with a more progressive agenda on the Kurdish issue and languishing political reforms, he said. Kurt said Erdogan had demonstrated that elections are never far from his mind when he stated during his November trip to India that he would resign from the post of AKP chairman if his party comes in second in March elections.

110. (C) Several contacts told us that Erdogan's street-fighter instincts combined with years of non-stop political pressure has led him to adopt an increasingly obdurate attitude over time. "Hurriyet" Ankara Bureau Chief Enis Berberoglu told us that Erdogan is a captive of his background: those from the Black Sea, like Erdogan tend to be emotional and pugnacious. Berberoglu faulted Erdogan for prizing loyalty above all else, which he said is responsible for the current "mediocrity" with which the PM has surrounded himself. Orhan Kaya, a political analyst and former AKP administrator, told us that Erdogan had steadily arranged for the departure of those who disagree with him. AKP had become devoid of previous pillars who helped leaven Erdogan's often hot-headed political street sense: Abdullah Gul, Abdulatif Sener, and Dengir Mir Firat. Without these checks, Erdogan's fighting instincts and authoritarian style have become amplified.

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Comment: Erdogan Down But Far From Out  
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¶11. (C) Prime Minister Erdogan appears increasingly beleaguered, as the fallout from the global financial crisis hits Turkey, allegations of AKP corruption continue, and the threat of terror persists in the Turkish mind. A recently released A and G Research Company poll concluded that Erdogan's approval rating fell from 62.8 percent in January to 29.7 percent in November. A November Metropoll survey placed AKP support at 35 percent, a 2.4 drop from its October survey and the lowest level in 2008. The Metropoll survey also found that 65.1 percent of participants said Turkey is heading in a bad direction and 52.2 percent indicated they believe AKP had not managed the economic crisis properly. Although the economic and other problems facing Erdogan certainly hinder his ability to maneuver, it would be unwise to read dropping poll numbers as a sure sign of his political demise. Erdogan has consolidated his power base within AKP, and any challenge to his leadership within the party is unthinkable. He remains by far Turkey's most popular leader, and none of his would-be challengers appears to be gaining from AKP's relative slump in public support.

¶12. (C) But the absence of checks on Erdogan's power comes with a heavy cost. His increasing reluctance to tolerate criticism diminishes the chances of inter-party cooperation on passing a new constitution or enacting badly needed EU-related political reforms. Focusing on winning elections above all else, Erdogan shows little evidence of a statesman's vision for Turkey, and appears to have shed his previous reformist spirit in favor of a more pronounced nationalist stance. Although a solid win in local elections conceivably could give him political cover, it seems increasingly unlikely that a truculent Erdogan will be willing to re-launch an aggressively reformist agenda.

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